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SUBJECT: GABON: PRESIDENT-ELECT BONGO'S WHISTLE STOP REGIONAL TOUR

¶1. (U) Gabon's President-elect Ali Bongo Ondimba has spent the last several days visiting heads of state in the Central Africa region. On September 11, Bongo met with Cameroonian President Paul Biya in Yaounde and President Denis Sassou Nguessou in Congo-Brazzaville. On September 12, he was received by Chadian President Idris Deby and Prime Minister Youssef Saleh in N'Djamena. Bongo made a stop later that day in Kinshasa to meet with President Joseph Kabila. On September 14, Bongo called on Angolan President Eduardo Dos Santos in Luanda, followed by a meeting with President Fradique de Menezes in Sao Tome.

¶2. (U) From the coverage in the pro-government l'Union newspaper, Bongo was received by the region's leaders with the protocol of a head of state. In a bow to Ali Bongo's father, President Deby noted the important role that the late President Bongo played in preserving peace in the region. The newspaper said Bongo sought advice from the heads of state and discussed Gabon's economic cooperation with the neighboring members of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), Gulf of Guinea Commission (CGG), and the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC). Bongo reportedly did not address election-related questions in public except to say that channels existed for the other candidates to challenge the results of the August 30 presidential election, namely through the Constitutional Court.

¶3. (SBU) Missing from Bongo's first foray outside of Gabon was a stop in Equatorial Guinea (EG) to meet with President Teodoro Obiang Nguema. EG and Gabon have a long-simmering dispute over Mbanie Island which lies in potentially oil-rich waters between the two countries. More directly related to the election, during the campaign rumors spread in Gabon of EG support for independent candidate Andre Mba Obame. In a press statement on September 14, EG's ambassador in Libreville denounced the Gabonese media role in spreading rumors aimed at damaging the EG-Gabon bilateral relationship.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: The private discussions during Bongo's regional stops probably included bilateral and personal matters, such as the tense relationship between Sassou Nguessou and the Bongo family following the death in March 2009 of Edith Bongo, Omar Bongo's wife and Sassou Nguessou's daughter. While the other 17 candidates in the presidential election are not allowed to leave Gabon while the riots in Port Gentil following the announcement of the election results are under investigation, Ali Bongo has started to carry out the foreign policy functions of a president. Furthermore, being received like a head of state by neighboring leaders further cements his claim to the presidency as the other candidates prepare challenges to the election results.

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